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Fantasy and reality in The robber bridegroom and Other voices, other rooms and : ambivalence, narration and national identity in Layamon's Brut

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in *The Robber Bridegroom* and *Other Voices, Other Rooms*"

and

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in Layamon's *Brut*"

by

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Thesis Papers
Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee
of Lehigh University
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

in
the Department of English

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

M.A. THESIS PAPERS

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1. Fantasy and reality in two Southern novels	
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Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* and Eudora Welty's *The Robber Bridegroom* are both Southern novels that appeared in the 1940s, before the move away from literary realism. Both novels present worlds that are fantastic, and both treat fantasy as an integral part of their characters' lives. Fulfillment and success for these characters, especially the main characters, lies not in rejecting fantasy and embracing reality, but in combining the two into their lives.

Robert J. Phillips, Jr., in his essay "A Structural Approach to Myth in the Fiction of Eudora Welty," quotes some of the author's own thoughts on fantasy. "'Fantasy itself must touch ground with at least one toe, and ghost stories must have one foot, so to speak, in the grave,'" (Phillips 57). Welty's remarks apply both to her novel *The Robber Bridegroom* and to Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Both move easily between the real and the fantastic, between the known and the unknown. Sometimes it is difficult to tell when the stories are completely grounded in reality and when they are touching it with just that "one toe," and this difficulty has given critics plenty to say on the topic. A look at the two novels' places within the genre of Southern literature seems a logical place to start.

Some critics, including Richard Gray, feel that the literature of the South has seen better days. In fact, he claims in his book *The Literature of Memory: Modern Writers of the American South* that it faces the very real possibility of going stale. He cites Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote as prime examples of the depressing trend in mid-20th century Southern literature. "The trap is, essentially, one of style: the writer takes the familiar characters, situations, and themes and then weaves them into a baroque conceit possessing neither original substance nor extrinsic value. The world so imagined hardly exists—or, at least, hardly deserves consideration—on any other level than the decorative: it offers us a group of charming grotesques, preserved in amber" (257).

Gray's sweeping criticism obviously has some exceptions, and it seems *Other Voices, Other Rooms* and *The Robber Bridegroom* should be two of them. The fact that these novels offer their share of grotesques—Capote's image of the mule hanging dead from the chandelier, Welty's description of Salome literally dancing herself to death—should not automatically mark them as "hardly deserving consideration." While Welty and Capote have chosen familiar themes (the fairy tale and the boy's search for his father), they have done something extraordinary with these themes. It is true that the worlds described in these novels—the antebellum Natchez Trace and a gothic house in the deep South—are not always familiar ground for the reader, but the authors' treatment of these worlds makes them so much more than decorative.

The Robber Bridegroom and *Other Voices, Other Rooms* have a great deal in common, including their births in the 1940s. Both are, in a sense, coming-of-age novels, set in the South and featuring odd, sometimes bizarre, characters. More importantly, Welty and Capote were ahead of their times in their choices to depart from strict reality. In his book *The Landscape of Nightmare*, Jonathan Baumbach describes the move away from the realism of life in the novels of the 1950s:

> The post-Second-World-War American novel is not so much concerned with social defeats and victories as with adamic falls and quixotic redemptions. That is, rather than concentrating on the society in which man eats, drinks, loves, and gets promoted, the novel of the fifties explores by and large the shadowy landscape of the self, often in the disguise of a dimly recognizable "real" world—a mythic world more consequential than the one it pretends to represent, more believable and horrible, more possible to survive in. (2)

While neither Eudora Welty's *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942) nor Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) were published in the era Baumbach describes, both

novels do contain this element of myth. Each, in its own way, is concerned with the falls and redemptions of its characters and centers its concern around issues of a personal nature. Both novels do make certain shifts from reality to fantasy. The degrees to which they circle back differ, but the idea of fantasy is what connects these two novels. The fantasies are aesthetically powerful, but they are fantasies with a purpose—not the "grotesques preserved in amber" that Gray describes.

Welty and Capote have constructed their own forms of reality and drawn the reader into their realm of fantasy, then stepped back and let the reader, and with the characters, come to their own reconciliation of the two. The way in which both authors use fantasy as an integral part of their novels, almost as a discrete character, is intriguing. Fantasy helps pass the time, is useful in deceiving others, and generally makes life more interesting. Most importantly, though, and the focus of this paper, is the way fantasy fills in the blanks when reality is unknown and becomes a defense mechanism when the truth is too difficult to face.

The novels contain several sets of characters who have parallel relationships with truth/reality. Joel Knox is Capote's protagonist, while Rosamond Musgrove is Welty's, and the two are similar in some ways. Both have rich fantasy lives, and both become so deeply invested in these fantasies that they seem real. Both lie easily, Rosamond to Salome and her father, and Joel to Zoo—and so they are both seen as somewhat unreliable. Both quickly recognize when others are being untruthful, but only Joel is truly upset by not knowing the whole truth. For example, he is angry with Miss Amy when she does not take Joel to see his father as she promised; Rosamond, however, accepts (even if

she does not like) the fact that her husband stains his face with berry juice to hide his identity from her. This difference makes sense within the tones of the two novels, for *Other Voices, Other Rooms* reads more like a mystery that Joel desperately wants to solve, while *The Robber Bridegroom* reads like a fairy tale where things that don't quite make sense are accepted anyway. The novel is a mystery for the reader to solve, to decipher what is real and what is imagined.

Other connections can easily be made between the two novels' characters. Randolph and Rosamond both are content to live in fantasy worlds. Randolph dresses in fancy women's clothes and writes letters to every post office on earth in search of a person he lost long ago. He also writes letters to Joel's aunt in Joel's father's name. Rosamond, too, lives in a dream world where she goes to pick herbs and imagines being carried off by wild animals or dashing robbers. Either is just as exciting to her, and these fantasies help her deal with her stepmother's hatred. While Rosamond's fantasies and lies are innocent, though, Randolph's are more sinister. For example, he takes Joel to see Little Sunshine, whom he says is expecting them, but Little Sunshine is surprised to see them. Later Joel finds out that Randolph wanted him out of the house because Joel's Aunt Helen was coming that day to take him back to live with her. Ultimately, Rosamond constructs a life in the real world, with only touches of fantasy. Randolph, on the other hand, prefers to live in the fantasy world he creates and pretend the real world doesn't exist.

Minor characters such as Idabel and Salome relate as well, as do Clement and Zoo. Both Salome and Idabel seem to be in a constant rage, both jealous of the beautiful

ones in their lives—Rosamond for Salome, and Florabel for Idabel. They are both fierce and seem primitive, frighteningly close to nature. While Idabel apparently has a good heart, however, Salome is nothing but evil, and she shows no sign of redemption, not even during her death. Clement and Missouri ("Zoo") each suffer great tragedies. Clement's wife and son are killed by Indians, and Zoo's husband tries to kill her by slitting her throat. Later, she is raped on her way up North and a man burns his cigar into her. Perhaps these horrible experiences have greatly affected them, as they stand out as the only two completely honest people in the two novels. Neither one ever lies. Although they are honest, they are both somewhat naïve as well. Clement is able to recognize Rosamond's obvious lies as such, but he is easily duped by people like Salome and Jamie Lockhart. Zoo, too, knows immediately when Joel is lying and shows him her displeasure about it. She envisions that life will be better up North, but she has no idea what it will really be like. Her first assumption about the men who attack her is that they have stopped to offer her a ride. Zoo and Clement are very vulnerable characters, perhaps because of their inability to distort the truth or to recognize when others are distorting the truth for other than harmless reasons.

In addition to their similar characters, Capote and Welty treat their subjects in similar ways. They both use classic tropes but with subtle subversions. Capote uses the idea of the young adventurer, reluctantly leaving the familiar to seek the unknown—in this case, his father. Every step Joel takes toward the reality of his father (rather than his fantasies about the man), though, takes him further into a world he doesn't understand. Every step toward reality is also a step toward a different kind of fantasy—one created by

other people instead of by Joel himself. Welty's structure is similarly both familiar and new. It seems useful here to explore Welty in detail, then return to Capote.

Merrill Maurice Skaggs, in his essay "The Uses of Enchantment in Frontier Humor and *The Robber Bridegroom*," outlines first the ways the novel fits the fairy tale pattern and then the ways in which the plot reverses that pattern. He discusses how fantasy plays a role in the structure of Welty's novel. He points out how she includes the fairy tale heroine, the benevolent father, the wicked stepmother, the charming lover and the colorful cast of minor characters. After this familiar introduction, however, Welty departs from the older fairy tale traditions and makes her story more realistic—and perhaps more adult, according to Skaggs:

> Welty's father here is not concerned with finding a proper heir for his kingdom, but rather with the nuisance value of building a kingdom at all. The wicked stepmother who has replaced his beloved first wife, he comes to suspect, might be his first wife after all, whom he now perceives as a demanding usurper because he has grown tired of her. His beautiful daughter, far from being pure and innocent, survives by habitually lying. Her concern is not about losing her virginity but about finding someone to give it to. Her robber "gets" her because she goes out to find him. And having "had" her, the robber disguised with berry stains suits her vastly better than the dandy Jamie Lockhart, whom her father introduces as a prospective husband. (61)

These intrusions into the fantasy world Welty sets up for her readers are comforting in some ways, according to Skaggs. He cites Bruno Bettelheim, who in his study *The Uses of Enchantment* states his views on the psychological benefits of fairy tales. Bettelheim believes fairy tales can help to relieve mental pressures by showing characters who find solutions to their problems. Welty's injections of reality into her

fantasy, especially modern touches like Rosamond's pregnancy, can make it even more useful for adult audiences, according to Skaggs (58).

Skaggs summarizes Bettelheim's argument about the way fairy tales reassure us: "According to Bettelheim, fairy tales are important to us not in times when we feel secure but in times when we feel profoundly threatened ... But whether our recurring interest in such fairy tales tells anything about our historical times or not, the stories still allow us to re-experience a buried part of ourselves which continually relishes its splendid triumphs" (62). Skaggs implies that the writing of *The Robber Bridegroom* may have been provoked by world events, by the need to escape the horrors of war by delving into make-believe (57). In this context it would seem that the novel does fulfill its purpose as a fairy tale: it shows the promise of success realized even in the face of antagonistic forces. The novel functions for its readers in the same way the fantasies of Welty's characters function for them, as distractions and as reassurances.

Warren French moves his discussion closer to the interior of the novel. He addresses the issue of fantasy and reality by looking more closely at the characters in *The Robber Bridegroom* in his essay, "'All Things Are Double': Eudora Welty as a Civilized Writer." He finds a certain reality in the doubleness of everything in the novel, including the environment, the narration and the characters themselves. French thinks the main characters (specifically Clement, Rosamond and Jamie) possess a stability because they are real from the beginning. These three are the important ones, the ones who contain dualities. The sense of "realness" about these characters, and indeed the way they perceive their own reality, is tied to this issue of duality: "Eudora Welty is concerned

rather with the quite non-Aristotelian notion that people are two things at once and that their 'identity' at any given moment is determined by the context in which they are discovered" (180).

The three main characters of the novel certainly depend on their environment for their identities, but French's idea that they are always "two things at once" does not seem to be true for the entire narrative. In fact, for most of the novel they are either one thing or the other, and almost never both together. For example, Clement is both the savvy traveler who will not stay at any inn where the innkeeper has lost an ear, and he is the naïve planter who believes Jamie's lies. He slips easily between the two, but never is—and never can be—both together. It is the idea of Clement's "innocence" that both brings these two halves of his personality together and gives him an aura of something unreal, according to French:

> Musgrove is innocent in the simple sense of "guiltless." He wishes no one ill, nor does he scheme or connive against anyone; he strives only to make the land productive and to please his loved ones with presents. "My time is over," he observes after a long meditation on the cycle of the seasons, "for cunning is of a world I will have no part in." (184-185)

Jamie, too, is able to reconcile the two halves of his personality. He is enabled not by innocence but by the society in which he lives, according to French. The changing Natchez Trace (and its accompanying mysticism) requires its inhabitants to join civilization but does not require them to change their ways of life drastically. "A shift in the controlling elements of society brings into power not a new class of persons but the most resourceful figures from the older order of things, wearing new guises" (French 186). He quotes Welty's narration near the end of the novel : "And as for [Jamie], the

outward transfer from bandit to merchant had been almost too easy to count it a change at all, and he was enjoying all the same success he had ever had" (Welty 184-185). Welty's comparison of merchants to robbers is a social criticism in its own right, but it also presents the context in which Jamie can experience the reality of both halves of himself.

French also finds a certain amount of fantasy in the wilderness of the trace. "Yet despite the gain in luxury and security that [Jamie and Rosamond] enjoy, something is lost—even this tale acknowledges—in the transition from forest to market-place" (187). He cites the raven "as emblem of man's affinity with wild and wise things" and mourns its loss, for it marks the death of the mysticism that the forest provides (187).

French's conclusion seems to be that Welty's portrayal of history may be less fantastic and more realistic than those who try to discuss it in the generally accepted terms of history. "It may be useful to view what—as Eudora Welty suggests—may be the passing triumph of the market-place through the detached consciousness of a civilized writer rather than the claims of its celebrators and detractors, who, whether they are impetuously guileless or deliberately duplicitous, produce more outrageous fantasies than *The Robber Bridegroom*" (188).

Barbara Harrell Carson provides a broader view of the novel and furthers French's investigation of dualities and by looking at more than just the three main characters. She sees reality as "created by the dynamic tension of co-existing opposites" (65), and the more equally characters develop these opposites the more real they become. She makes a useful distinction between characters who ignore one side of their identities (like Salome

and Little Harp) and those who develop both sides separately instead of bringing them together (like Clement, Jamie and Rosamond).

In a sense, Carson views the entire novel as a shift on a continuum from fairy tale toward reality (66). The earliest action of the story is Clement Musgrove's departure from his home in Kentucky to live in the wilderness of Mississippi. He leaves his Edenic state and inexplicably heads south into the unknown:

> "The reason I ever came is forgotten now," he said. "I know I am not a seeker after anything, and ambition in this world never stirred my heart once. Yet it seemed as if I was caught up by what came over the others, and they were the same. There was a great tug at the whole world, to go down over the edge, and one and all we were changed into pioneers, and our hearts and our own lonely wills may have had nothing to do with it." (Welty 20-21)

Carson makes a connection to the fall of Adam and Eve, and Musgrove's rationale does have a similar ring to it. Certainly his sorrow over the loss of his wife and son and his "blissful" life bears a resemblance to the loss of Paradise. Carson's structure of Kentucky as fairy tale and the Natchez Trace as reality provides an interesting contrast to French, who identifies the Natchez Trace as the location of wild fantasy in opposition to the civilization of New Orleans. This contrast highlights the reader's—and sometimes the characters'—difficulty in distinguishing between reality and fantasy.

Reality in Welty's novel, according to Carson, is available only to those characters who display "the acknowledgment of the harmony to be found in the co-existence of the contraries" (66). What distinguishes between the real characters (Clement, Jamie and Rosamond) and the unreal characters (Salome and Little Harp) for Carson is their ability to see either their own dualities or the dualities of others.

Interestingly, she writes that the unreal ones forego recognition of their own dual natures for the ability to recognize acutely the two halves of others. "While the innocent planter has only abstract insight into the mingled identity of Rosamond's robber lover, the evil Salome and the Little Harp have specific evidence that Jamie Lockhart and the outlaw are one" (68). Carson points specifically to Salome's and Little Harp's knowledge that Jamie and the bandit are one and the same person. The key to this knowledge, though, is knowing how to use it. Carson writes:

> Salome's and Little Harp's relations to others have their own kind of simplicity: they use them. That Rosamond and Jamie—both of whom deny one side of their identity—are such easy victims implies the vulnerability that accompanies attempted retreats to a simple identity. Paradoxically, however, that very vulnerability contains the seeds for human growth: only when they are forced to confront their duplex identities can Rosamond and Jamie experience life's fullness of sorrow and joy. (69)

Carson's arguments lead her to the conclusion that Rosamond and Jamie both experience integration of their identities through the deaths of their respective counterparts: Salome and Little Harp (70-71). Little Harp represents the ugly side of Jamie, the violent and deadly aspects of his life as a bandit. "While we, like Rosamond, actually see in action only the dashing Lochinvar/Robin Hood side of Jamie, Welty is careful to remind us of the more somber business of his profession" (70). She cites Mike Fink's fear of Jamie, Jamie's own acknowledgment of his connection with Little Harp through his inability to kill Little Harp, and the similarities between Jamie's rape of Rosamond and Little Harp's rape of the Indian girl. Carson is careful to point out, however, that Little Harp's death (at Jamie's own hands) does not equal the death of Jamie's robber nature. "To think the robber in Jamie dies completely is to miss the whole point of the theme of doubleness, of

the necessary and valuable reality of human psychological polarity. Thus the death of Little Harp signals, not the death of Jamie's robber self, but his acceptance of integration of the two poles of self into one whole" (71). Here Carson seems to agree with French that Welty's transformation of Jamie into a merchant allows him to retain his robber self—a social criticism, but one that does not seem out of place in the fairy tale structure.

Carson points to Rosamond as the character with the most fully developed sense of doubleness, next to Jamie. Her world is much more imbedded in fantasy than his, however, for she tells lies so easily that she seems almost to believe them. She apparently has an active imagination, for she has had abduction fantasies and does not seem overly upset by Jamie's theft of her clothing. "Rosamond had imagined such things happening in the world, and what she would do if they did" (Welty 49-50). Her continued contact with Jamie has an effect on Rosamond's perception of reality, for "her psychological state also bears witness to the real-life adult's need for the state of tension created by the simultaneity of apparent contraries ... [E]ven the happiness of love is incomplete without sorrow which passes in the world of the simple as totally alien to love" (Carson 73).

As Rosamond begins to experience the complication of duality, her relationship with Salome changes as well. Welty pairs them as direct opposites from the beginning, but in Salome's eyes Rosamond's marriage to her robber bridegroom links them (Carson 73). "There has to be a first time for everything, and at that moment the stepmother gave Rosamond a look of true friendship, as if Rosamond too had got her man by unholy means. But Rosamond began to wilt then, like a flower cut and left in the sun" (Welty 122). Just as Little Harp's death helps Jamie achieve integration of his two selves, the

death of Salome enables Rosamond to move toward her own reality. This part of Carson's argument is somewhat complicated, but it goes back to her earlier claim that the novel continually moves from fantasy to reality. This claim, however, is complicated by her later conclusion—that Jamie and Rosamond return to a fairy tale life. They do, in fact, for they reunite magically just as Jamie is boarding a ship to take him away. They do marry, as all fairy tale couples must. It seems more logical to view the novel as moving from fairy tale to distorted fairy tale, then back to "correct" fairy tale again.

Carson begins and ends her discussion by addressing the "outer" doubleness of *The Robber Bridegroom*: the genres of fairy tale and history. "Michael Kreyling has seen in the mixture of fairy tale and history an expression of the tension between pastoral dream and capitalistic reality in America," Carson writes (64). One of her concerns seems to be the work that the fairy tale tries to accomplish. "The folk fairy tale that Welty incorporated into her story is grounded on the child's need for simplicity ... Welty's novel is about the lesson needed to move us from the child's world to the adult's, from a fairy tale vision of life to a philosophically, psychologically, and historically corrected outlook" (65).

This outlook, though it may be more realistic, is not necessarily happier, according to Carson. "Indeed, for all the rollicking gaiety of its surface, *The Robber Bridegroom* presents one of Welty's darkest visions of reality, a darkness intensified by Clement's perception of a cosmic horror in which humans appear as "little mice" in a life seen as "a maze without end" (Carson 75). She argues that the fairy tale text eases some of the pain of what reality in this world might look like. "If this were not a comedy,

protected by its fairy tale wrappings, a character like Clement would surely be driven mad by the cruel, senseless and overpowering forces of life that assail him" (75).

Carson cites some of Welty's own remarks on her novel to conclude her argument about reality in *The Robber Bridegroom*. "The desire to push beyond the view of life as *simplex*, into knowledge of its real multiplicity Welty identified as the motivation behind the plot in *The Robber Bridegroom*. The truth in the story, she wrote, lies in the need "to find out what we all wish to find out, exactly who we are, and who the other fellow is, and what we are doing here all together'" (Carson 78-79). Carson argues that the fantasy and reality in the novel help the reader as much as the characters to achieve the fullest integration of their own selves. "Thus, while Jamie and Rosamond have returned to life in a fairy tale, the reader carries away the corrected vision of a reality in which darkness and light, hope and despair, joy and sorrow, beginnings and endings are dynamically united in the terrible and marvelous cosmic dance" (81). This idea of fantasy as a useful tool is what connects Welty's and Capote's novels.

Robert J. Phillips, Jr., although he acknowledges the fact that Welty's stories do not necessarily lend themselves to categorization, attempts to outline three uses of myth and fantasy in her fiction. The categories most useful in a discussion of Welty and Capote are the second and third:

> In the second category, the narrator defines character and setting almost entirely in terms of myth and fantasy so that the reader's understanding develops from the narrator's arrangement of allegory and symbol. In the third category, however, some characters consciously experience the rich, imaginative dimension of myth and fantasy; therefore, the reader must deal with the character's as well as the narrator's insight. (59)

Phillips places *The Robber Bridegroom* in the second category, arguing that Clement is unable to understand his awareness of the duality of life in terms of myth and fantasy. Phillips' categorization of the novel seems somewhat questionable, however, because Rosamond has a rich fantasy life which she does recognize as fantasy. Welty's novel in some ways meets the requirements of Phillips' third category because the reader must assess the novel on both levels of fantasy: the interior and the exterior, the fantasies of the text and of the characters.

Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* is also difficult to categorize in these terms because its connections with fantasy are more vague. The lines between reality and fantasy, between dreaming and waking, are less distinct than in *The Robber Bridegroom*. This difference lies perhaps in the tones and styles of each third-person narrator. Welty's narrator is relatively friendly and does not seem to hide anything from the reader, while Capote's narrator does not seem as forthcoming. Welty's narrator, though, is omniscient, while Capote's narrator seems to know only what Joel knows.

Chris Anderson, in his book *Style as Argument*, cites several instances when Capote is a distanced narrator in his fiction. "... [T]hroughout his narratives Capote remains silent about important details, avoiding explicit interpretation and commentary. He repeatedly puts himself in the position of an outside observer forced to make inferences and read meanings on the basis of external detail" (48). Anderson also references several moments in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* when the narrator is not overly helpful—because Capote has not given that narrator any more information than the reader has:

> The narrator is silent for most of the story about Joel's father. ... He deliberately withholds information and interpretation throughout the first half of the novel. We know no more than Joel. With him we must explore the strange, silent house and deal with its enigmatic inhabitants—Randolph, Miss Amy—drawing what conclusions we can. ... Capote leaves us with Joel to work out its significance. (49)

Thus, Capote's novel does not exactly fit into Phillips' system either, because the reader does have the character's insight to examine but is denied the insight of the narrator—the narrator has no insight. Anderson's discussion of this topic is somewhat unhelpful, because he seems to be blaming a narrator for withholding information that the narrator does not seem to have.

Kenneth Reed, in his book *Truman Capote*, looks at *Other Voices, Other Rooms* as a romance. He discusses the novel in a chapter titled "Three Novel-Romances," which also includes a discussion of *The Grass Harp* and *Tiffany's*. Reed writes, "The tenor of the three books is such that they are all well within the province of the 'novel-romance' for as Ihab Hassan has written, all attempt successfully 'to engage reality without being realistic'" (71). The novel does seem to constantly lose and regain reality. Some of this sense of the unreal is created by the narrator's lack of commentary, but much of it is created by the fantasies the characters themselves create.

Even from the beginning, Joel seems to have no difficulties with breaks from reality. "He got into a habit of sharing the box-lunch Ellen fixed for him with a giant negro stevedore who, as they talked together, spun exotic sea-life legends that Joel knew to be lies even as he listened'" (11). Joel engages in his own fantasy creation as he imagines chance encounters with his father. "The miracle he'd planned, however, was in

the nature or a kind old rich lady who, having glimpsed him on a street-corner, immediately dispatched an envelope stuffed with thousand-dollar bills; or a similar Godlike action on the part of some goodhearted stranger. And this stranger, as it turned out, was his father, which to his mind was simply a wonderful piece of luck" (12). Like Rosamond, Joel imagines scenarios so that he will be prepared in case they ever occur. Unlike Rosamond, however, Joel is forced quickly to give up these fantasies when it becomes clear that they will never come true. "But afterwards, ... a different picture of his father and of his situation asserted itself: he did not know what to expect, and he was afraid, for already there were so many disappointments" (13).

Even though he stops lying to himself, though, Joel is still able to create fantasies for the benefit of other people and temporarily for himself. He tells a long tale to Missouri Fever about his experience in the snow when his mother froze to death. She doesn't believe him, because she knows the truth. "Somehow, spinning the tale, Joel had believed every word; the cave, the howling wolves, these had seemed more real than Missouri and her long neck, or Miss Amy, or the shadowy kitchen" (59).

Barbara Harrell Carson's discussion of "the dynamic tension of co-existing opposites" in Welty can be useful here in looking at Joel as well. Joel is the most real character because, in addition to being the protagonist, he fits Carson's criteria of developing his opposites. He lives in the real world and wants to know how and why things are, yet he constructs elaborate fantasies for himself. He gives equal attention to both worlds, making him a "real" character like Clement, Jamie and Rosamond. Just as only the "unreal" characters of Salome and Little Harp know that Jamie and the robber

are one, Joel, as a "real" character, does not realize until the end that Randolph and the lady in the upstairs window are one. Carson seems to agree with Reed that Joel constantly loses and gains reality—and she sees this as a very good thing.

Just as *The Robber Bridegroom* is a part of the fairy tale genre, Reed sees the novel as deeply invested in the gothic tradition: "*Other Voices, Other Rooms* is less a novel than it is a gothic romance: brooding, sinister, mysterious, inward-reaching, lyrical, and shadowy. The only sense of reality in it is psychological realism" (77). Walter Allen, in his book *the Modern Novel*, also identifies the gothic elements of Capote's fiction but doesn't see them quite as darkly as does Reed. "Truman Capote's novels may ... be called gothic, but here the gothic has been turned all to favour and prettiness. The nightmare has become the fairy-tale, which could be considered the censored form of nightmare" (56). Allen's characterization of the novel's gothic nature seems somewhat off the mark, since so much of the story is filled with ugliness: Randolph shooting Mr. Sansom; Zoo being attacked twice; the mule hanging from the chandelier; Jesus Fever dying in pain and confused. These images are far from "favour and prettiness," and they seem more in line with Reed's understanding of them as "brooding and sinister."

Alberto Moravia also looks at the gothic flavor of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* in comparison to Edgar Allen Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* in *Sewanee Review*:

> There is a difference between Poe's and Capote's approach to reality. Poe, even at his most fantastic and unreal, is always extremely literal, accurate, and realistic in his aims and intentions ... For Truman Capote, instead, this process worked in reverse. The motive which encouraged Capote to accumulate details which build up a fantastic atmosphere, page after page, in a rich and crowded design, was instead a longing to evade reality" (479-481).

Moravia expresses disappointment that novels increasingly attempt to show reality through the distorted eyes of a child, and he feels Capote does not always succeed in bringing his readers back to recognizable ground. But Moravia seems to forget about those moments of clarity that appear regularly. Capote sets up a pendulum between reality and fantasy worlds and swings it back and forth with relatively smooth timing. He starts the novel in a very clear, realistic place, with Joel journeying to his father. Fantasy then appears when he arrives at Skully's Landing and sees the woman at the upstairs window. His runaway attempt with Idabel is clear up until the point when they go to the carnival. The novel is then full of fantasy and misunderstanding until Joel recovers from his illness. He is then clear again, but the visit to Little Sunshine re-enters fantasy. The end of the novel, however, especially the last paragraph, is extremely lucid:

> His mind was absolutely clear. He was like a camera waiting for its subject to enter focus. ... Beyond one [of the clouds] someone was watching him. All of him was dumb except his eyes. They knew. And it was Randolph's window. ... She beckoned to him, shining and silver, and he knew he must go: unafraid, not hesitating, he paused only at the garden's edge where, as though he'd forgotten something, he stopped and looked back at the bloomless, descending blue, at the boy he had left behind. (Capote 231)

Moravia may not like where the novel ends up, but Joel is certainly on "recognizable ground." In fact, Joel finally seems secure and confident in the last paragraph.

Claude J. Summers has a slightly different argument than Moravia. He also feels that Capote does not leave his reader in any kind of familiar or welcome place, but he offers a possible reason. In his book *Gay Fictions* he looks at the novel's homosexual theme as a way of escaping the realities of life. Summers writes:

> [The novel's] stereotypically negative depiction of homosexuality works against the narrative thread that culminates in Joel's recognition of his gayness. The result

> is a muddle: the novel's positive theme of progress toward self-knowledge is contradicted by its subliminal message that homosexuality is a retreat from real life into a ghostly death-in-life existence. (132)

Summers argues that Capote's depiction of homosexuality, characterized by the pathetically bizarre Randolph, causes the reader to feel Joel has lost something through his initiation to his homosexual nature. "Joel's initiation is a cause more for sadness than for celebration. Joel has left the perplexities of childhood only to embrace Randolph's fearful and tormented life of fantasy" (133). In this construction, Joel must choose between the fantasy world of Randolph and the real world of Aunt Helen. His choice is complicated by the fact that his aunt is relieved to see him leave her home, knowing that she no longer has to care for him (Capote 12).

Summers takes issue with the fact that Capote portrays homosexuality as "distinctly unappetizing and utterly unconvincing" (132). "In the novel, homosexuality is a negation of masculinity, not simply because it involved effeminacy and transvestism but also, and most importantly, because it signified passive resignation and despair. It is an 'ugly room' that represents an escape from reality into the make-believe of Randolph's sentimental and self-indulgent fantasies" (132). What Summers seems to miss here, though, like Moravia, is the clarity that accompanies Joel's decision to enter Randolph's world. This is not a passive movement. As the narrator says, "It was as if he had been counting in his head and, arriving at a number, decided through certain intuitions, thought: now" (231). Perhaps Joel had been moving toward this moment for the entire novel: his experiences with Idabel and Miss Wisteria had been unsatisfying, and he continually found himself fascinated by and drawn to Randolph. However distasteful

Capote may portray Randolph's world, Joel seems to enter into it with full knowledge and full consent.

While Summers sees the novel's issues of fantasy and reality embedded in its homosexual theme, William Nance enlarges the issue of reality to encompass the search for love in the novel. In his book *The Worlds of Truman Capote*, Nance addresses the impact the failure to accept reality has on an individual's relationship with himself and with those around him. "The fear and sense of captivity that overshadow these stories result from the individual's inability to accept and respond properly to reality. On the social level this means inability to love other persons. More essentially, it means refusal to accept mysterious and frightening elements within the self" (16). Perhaps that is why Joel only seems truly happy and takes positive steps toward action at the end of the novel—when he acknowledges his desire to join Randolph.

Nance's idea corresponds to the concerns about conflicting identities and the definition of reality as the tension between co-existing opposites used in the discussion of Welty. Indeed, both novels deal with the integration of the self as a step toward reality. Joel accepts his homosexual nature, even though it may be an unsatisfactory ending for some of these critics. He makes his own choice and comes to terms with his own reality, just as Jamie Lockhart is able to reconcile his bandit nature with his upstanding reputation and dashing romanticism. He does not lose anything by combining the two except the stress of keeping them separate. Like Rosamond, Joel tells and believes his own lies, but both characters rely on these lies less and less as their identities begin to converge and enter the realm of their own reality.

The Robber Bridegroom and *Other Voices, Other Rooms* both use fantasy very effectively as a structure for the novel. But the real beauty of the reality-fantasy dichotomy lies in the way this dichotomy functions for the characters. Reality is not identified with good, nor fantasy with bad. Both are given equal status in the lives of the characters, and the main characters are able to move freely between the two. Welty and Capote are striking in the way they use fantasy not just as entertainment, but as a vital and health part of their characters' lives. Fulfillment for these characters—for Rosamond, Jamie, Clement, Joel and Randolph—lies in finding the right balance between fantasy and reality, with both as necessary elements.

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"Ambivalence, Narration and National Identity
in Layamon's *Brut*"

by

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Layamon narrates Britain's history in his *Brut* to show the way the nation was created and sometimes destroyed. His narration is also an attempt to further unify and strengthen that nation. The *Brut* shows the concerns of its writer—and its characters—about which of the diverse groups involved are to be included in the national identity.

In his essay "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," Homi K. Bhabha examines the ways narration is used to create the nation. "To write the story of the nation demands that we articulate that archaic ambivalence that informs modernity. We may begin by questioning that progressive metaphor of modern social cohesion—*the many as one*—shared by organic theories of the holism of culture and community, and by theorists who treat gender, class, or race as radically 'expressive' social totalities" (294). Layamon's *Brut* is concerned with these issues of nationhood and the way it is created through the stories its people tell. The narrative is written from the perspective of a cohesive nation, and it attempts to tell the story of how that unity was formed from several disparate groups. Layamon focuses on stories as the uniting factor in the production of the British nation.

Arthur's speech in the *Brut* often reflects this awareness of the narrative, including the encouragement he gives to his knights just before battle. One of the knights gives the others a message from Arthur, saying, "And ye within, then ye be ware, that when ye hear the din, that ye the gates unfasten; and sally out of the burgh, and fell your foes; and smite on Childric, the strong and the powerful, and we shall tell them British tales!" (190). Later Arthur says of the Scots, "Let the trumpets blow, and assemble our host, and at the midnight we shall march forth-right toward Moray, our honour to win. If the Lord will it, who shaped the daylight, we shall tell them sorrowful tales, and fell their boast, and themselves kill" (199).

The text connects battle to the telling of tales three ways: through the past, the present, and the future. Arthur wants to defend the greatness of his country and preserve the honor it has gained through previous battles and which he has heard about through tales. A victory for the British at this point would create another tale of greatness for his country in the present, and years—and even centuries—later the tale of Arthur's victory would inspire other British soldiers. Arthur's use of the phrase "tell them tales" to mean "defeat them in battle" places his actions and the actions of his knights in the continuum of history. It also forms a connection between the telling of narratives and military activity.

Arthur's words also fit into one of Bhabha's "doublenesses": they are both pedagogical and performative. He equates the idea of British tales with the idea of victory and honor, thereby defining a British tale, and even the British nation itself. His words also encourage the knights to perform well in battle, in a sense asking them to validate what Arthur has just said. He asks them not to change the tale by accepting defeat. Each performance challenges pedagogy, and if Britain is associated with victory, every battle has the potential to destroy that idea. Arthur's words split the idea of the enemy into the pedagogical and the performative as well. He gives his knights two tasks: to fell the enemies' boasts and to kill the enemies. Both the stories and the lives of the enemy must be ended. This phrasing seems to suggest that it is possible to destroy an enemy without destroying his boast. The enemies' stories, in fact, must be replaced by tales of the victors, according to Dennis P. Donahue in "The Darkly Chronicled King." He points out a time when Arthur realizes that "telling British tales" could have greater consequences

than killing the enemy. "After boasting that he has driven Childric 'to the very edge of death,' Arthur agrees to his enemies' plea to be spared their lives and to be allowed to return to their homeland, for he believes the Saxons will return to their land and tell stories of Arthur the king" (139).

Joseph D. Parry, in his essay "Narrators, Messengers, and Lawman's *Brut*," discusses the power that Arthur's boasts have to control the actions of his enemies:

> News of Arthur's arrival and intent to conquer is enough to evoke the same kind of submissive language and terms as Gillomar delivers to Arthur, without, significantly, battle or bloodshed. ... Arthur becomes, pardon the cliché, a legend in his own time, especially as the *Brut* makes explicit that Arthur is the prophesied character of a preexisting legend that Merlin has already told. (50-51)

Layamon seems uncomfortable with this power, according to Parry, with the idea that "the message concerning Arthur's invincibility that has gone before him, fought, as it were, his battles for him, has taken on a life of its own" (51). While some, like Layamon, may feel the double threat that Arthur possesses—both his own military strength and the reputation that precedes him—is somewhat exaggerated, it certainly serves Arthur well for much of his reign.

The doubleness Bhabha discusses also is present in both Layamon's and the Britons' treatment of the Saxons. Layamon as narrator often refers to Hengest, the great Saxon warrior, as "fairest of all knights" (139). With his plan to deceive the Britons and slaughter them under the guise of a truce, he is no longer considered fair. "Here became Hengest wickedest of knights; so is every man that deceiveth one, who benefits him. Who would ween, in this worlds-realm, that Hengest thought to deceive the king who had his daughter! For there is never any man, that men may not over-reach with treachery" (139-

140). Layamon also calls Hengest treacherous and a traitor. Later, though, he refers to Hengest as the strongest of all knights (149) and so brave a knight (154). Layamon seems instinctively to admire Hengest and only thinks of him as traitorous when he is forced to remember Hengest's actions. He expresses surprise that Hengest could turn against Vortiger and seems to want to believe that Hengest is a worthy knight. Layamon also imparts this ambivalence toward Hengest to his characters, including Vortiger. "Adolf drew his sword, and smote off Hengest's head; and the king took him forth-right, because he was so brave a knight, and laid him in earth, after the heathen law, and prayed for the soul, that it never were happy" (154).

Vortiger embodies the ambivalence described in the opening quote from Bhabha: he places himself between his pagan Saxon wife and his Christian British sons. He cannot commit himself to one side or another. Vortiger embraces the pagan religion but is unwilling to upset the British nobles by giving land to Hengest, his father-in-law. After he has Hengest killed, Vortiger buries him according to pagan custom but prays against his soul as an enemy. Layamon's text does not clarify whether Vortiger used Christian or pagan prayers, but the implication is that he wants to make some return to his former sense of union with his British subjects.

The ambivalence toward the Saxons in Briton can be approached through Bhabha's statement about the pedagogical and the performative. "In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site

of *writing the nation*" (297). The performative acts of the Britons repeat through history, while the pedagogical task of defining what it means to be British is accomplished gradually. For example, the performative can be seen as the battles the Britons wage. Throughout Layamon's Brut they fight the Scots, the Saxons, the Romans and Mordred and his men, and later they are invaded by the Normans. Some battles are lost and some are won, but essentially they are mere repetitions, constant attempts to prove superiority and sovereignty. Each battle, however, adds changes the pedagogy slightly, defining more clearly what it means to be British. When the Britons fight the Scots, Scots clearly are not included as Britons. In the battle against the Saxons, the Saxons are seen as the outsiders who have to be excluded. Even though the Romans do not invade Britain, they still must be defeated to prove the independence of the British sovereignty. What it is interesting is that by the time the Normans invade Britain, the British identity also includes Anglo-Saxons (or Irish-Saxons like Layamon). The definition of the British nation evolves through repetitive battles with different groups of people.

Layamon has difficulty including the Anglo-Saxons in the definition of Britons. Some critics, including Daniel Donoghue, have been interested in the style of Layamon's *Brut* as it relates to the poet's anti-Anglo-Saxon leanings:

> Ambivalence preserves the opposition. The two sides are at an equilibrium, a tension pulling in two directions. Layamon, I believe, recognized the ambivalent signals in using an Anglo-Saxon verse style to compose a long anti-Anglo-Saxon tract. Far from neutralizing the opposition, he took pains to heighten the racial antipathies, and in doing so perhaps he was trying to direct the attention of his contemporary English readers to a powerful historical analogy: just as the Britons had been punished for their wickedness by the invasions of the Anglo-Saxons, so the Anglo-Saxons were punished by the Norman Conquest. (558)

The idea of British nationality has always been complicated, Donoghue claims, and it was not any simpler in Layamon's time than in Arthur's.

Throughout Layamon's *Brut*, specifically for Arthur and Vortiger, the problem of national identity resides at the core of the narrative. The struggle to bring together "the many as one" becomes all the more difficult when it is not clear who gets included in the many. Bhabha asks, "But what if, as I have argued, the people are the articulation of a doubling of the national address, an ambivalent *movement* between the discourses of pedagogy and the performative?" (300). In Layamon's brief tracing of the development of the British nation, this ambivalence in the people of Briton both creates and complicates the idea of the British nationality.

One of the more complicated problems in Layamon's *Brut* is the fact that women clearly are not included in this many. The *Brut* traces national identity in terms of race only, and it ignores the role gender plays. Unity of gender is not desired in the same way that unity of the nation is desired; instead, gender (specifically women) is often seen as the site of fractures, of the destruction of unity.

When individual women are either directly or indirectly the cause of division in the *Brut*, their actions usually come about in one of two ways: their presence as wives or their absence as mothers. The absence of Vortiger's first wife allows him the freedom to marry Rowenna, opening the door for disunity to enter the kingdom. His dead wife is referred to by the subjects of the kingdom as virtuous and good. "The king loved the heathens and harmed the Christians; the heathens had all this land to rule under their hand, and the king's three sons oft suffered sorrow and care. Their mother was then dead,

therefore they had the less counsel—their mother was a woman most good, and led a life very Christian, and their stepmother was a heathen, Hengest's daughter" (132). It is interesting that one of the only women who is spoken of only in a positive light in the *Brut* is dead. Layamon also seems to impart a potential for motherly influence to this nameless woman, which is interesting considering that very few of the mothers in the text seem to have any power whatsoever over their son's actions.

The wife of Constantine is another mother whose only role appears to be to give birth to her sons. Her name is never mentioned either, like the first wife of Vortiger, but her sons are Constance, Aurelius Ambrosie, and Uther Pendragon. There is no mention of her dying before her husband, and there is evidence that she is both still alive and with her younger sons after Constantine is murdered. "The tidings came to court, how the king had fared; then was mickle sorrow spread to the folk. Then were the Britons busy in thought, they knew not through anything what they might have for king, for the king's two sons, little were they both. Ambrosie could scarcely ride on horse, and Uther, his brother, yet still suckled his mother" (118). Layamon does not say whether she goes with her two younger sons to Less Britain, nor does he say whether she returns with them years later. No further mention of this queen is made.

Arthur's mother Ygærne, one of the few mothers who is named, is the cause of a war between Uther and her husband because of Uther's love for her. She is indirectly responsible not only for the death of her husband, but also for the deaths of all the men who are killed in this battle. Uther, however, the one who began the battle, does not express any remorse even though the references to the Biblical story of David and

Bathsheba are clear. Ygærne is later redeemed somewhat because of her status as Arthur's mother, but she also provides the kingdom with Morgan La Fey, yet another woman who is a source of division for Briton. What is interesting is even though Layamon does not mention Morgan La Fey in his narrative, later narratives would alert readers to her existence and to her connection to Ygærne. In this way, narratives (including romances) construct history to the extent that readers insert into a text the "truth" that they have read in other narratives.

Guenevere, also a site of differing histories in the collection of Arthur narratives, is the site of perhaps the most destructive division in all of the Arthurian legend: she divides Arthur's own kingdom and causes enmity between Arthur and Mordred. From the first instance that Layamon mentions her, Guenevere ("Wenhaver" in the *Brut*) is an exchange between men. "This maiden's mother was of Romanish men, Cador's relative; and the maid Cador on him bestowed, and her received her fair, and softly her fed. She was of noble race, of Romanish men; was in no land any maid so fair, of speech and of deeds, and of manners most good; she was named Wenhaver, fairest of women" (204). The emphasis here is on which men were Guenevere's ancestors, and who are her relatives, and who is her husband. She is Arthur's link not just to Cador but to Guenevere's Romanish ancestors, increasing his nobility through his marriage to her. This image of unity is not the one with which Layamon will leave the reader, though. In the end, Guenevere is the source of division, both of the kingdom and of Arthur's family. News of her affair with Mordred reaches Arthur after his battle with the Romans, and Mordred is constantly referred to as "thy sister's son." The choice of these terms as an

identification for Mordred is yet another implicit laying of blame at the feet of a woman, that division for Arthur comes not just from his nephew, but from his sister as well. She is not allowed to remain uninvolved in this betrayal. Guenevere, like so many of the other women, disappears. Her whereabouts after the battle between Mordred and Arthur are not known:

> Out of York she went by night, and toward Kaerleon drew, as quickly as she might; thither she brought by night two of her knights; and men covered her head with a holy veil, and she was there a nun; woman most wretched! Then men knew not of the queen, where she were gone, nor many years afterwardes man knew it in sooth, whether she were dead, or whether she herself were sunk in the water. (263)

Rowenne, daughter of Hengest and second wife of Vortiger, is an interesting woman to look at as she appears in the *Brut* because she is the only non-British woman who is mentioned in any detail. From her first appearance Rowenne is labeled a treacherous woman. She allows her father to use her to get closer to Vortiger, and in fact she seems a willing participant in his plan. Like Guenevere, she is used to join two groups of men. The Saxons entice Vortiger to drink to intoxication, causing him to desire Rowenne. "The maiden was dear to the king, even as his own life; he prayed on Hengest, his chieftain, that he should give him the maid-child. Hengest found in his counsel to do what the king asked him; he gave him Rouwenne, the woman most fair" (132). It is not long before Hengest uses his status as father-in-law to petition Vortiger for land. "'Hearken to me now, lord king, thou art to me dear through all tings; thou hast my daughter, who is to me very dear, and I am to thee among folk as if I were thy father" (133). Hengest is able to use this connection Rowenne has formed for him later in the

narrative. Vortiger trusts that Hengest, his father-in-law, will not betray him, and because of this naïve trust Hengest is able to slay most of Vortiger's men.

The difference between Rowenne and Guenevere, and indeed between Rowenne and every other woman in the *Brut*, is that Rowenne is the only individual woman shown killing anyone. Her method of murder is not violence or open battle like the men. She uses both wine and religion to kill Vortimer, her stepson:

> It befell on a time she betook her to counsel, that she would go to the King Vortimer ... and receive the Christendom ... Hearken how she took on, this deceitful woman! In her bosom she bare, beneath her teats, a golden phial filled with poison; ... The while that the king laughed, she drew out the phial, the bowl she set to her chin, the poison she poured in the wine, and afterwards she delivered the cup to the king; the king drank all the wine, and the poison therein. (137-138)

Like her father, Rowenne plays on the trust of her victim and uses a sense of family unity to bring about death. As James Noble says in his essay "Layamon's 'Ambivalence' Reconsidered":

> Every bit the equal of her treacherous and duplicitous male counterparts in the poem, Rowena manages to gain the king's confidence and access to his court by pretending that she wishes to convert to Christianity. In Layamon's handling of the incident, moreover, the deceitful Rowena ultimately succeeds in poisoning the king by engaging him in a wassail exchange, a Saxon ceremony which, as Layamon has already taken some pains to inform us, was meant to be a celebration of friendship and mutual trust. (173-174)

Rowenne seems especially devious here because she does not openly declare herself as a warrior—she draws her enemy in with a cultural gesture meant to show trust. She goes from being a means of unifying men (even though from Layamon's perspective this unity with the heathen Saxons would be undesirable) to being a method for destroying men through death. Like many of the other women, however, Rowenne simply disappears. Her

death is not discussed, but she does not seem to play another role in the narrative. Once she has done her part to destroy unity, she is forgotten.

This identification of men with unity and women with particularity is not limited to medieval thought about Arthurian times. In his essay "Death, Women and Power," Maurice Bloch suggests that throughout different eras and cultures, women have been associated with death, the ultimate form of division. He focuses on the *famidahana*, or the funeral rites of the Merina peoples of Madagascar, to show how the link of women with death provides a form of healing for the community. "What is being acted out in the *famidahana* is that blessing in unity is achieved through victory over individuals, women, and death itself (in its polluting and sad aspects) so that these negative elements can be replaced by something else: the life-giving entry into the tomb. This is achieved by breaking through, vanquishing this world of women, of sorrow, of death and division" (Bloch 217-218).

Bloch points out the ways in which the Merina women, and in fact women in nearly every culture in the world, receive death as their cultural assignment. "Again and again women are given death while the social order is reaffirmed elsewhere" (226). This idea is true in Layamon's *Brut*, for men are seen as reaffirming the social order while women are the ones who threaten to destroy it. What is interesting about the *Brut*, though, is those moments when instead of being "given death," women are the ones who "give death" to others. Both directly and indirectly, women are blamed for the death of men in the narrative. The most gruesome example is the British women who kill their enemies in a violent manner:

> A man should have seen the game, how the women forth marched over woods and over fields, over hills and over dales. Wheresoever they found any man escaped, that was with Melga the heathen king, the women loud laughed, and tore him all in pieces, and prayed for the soul, that never should good be to it. Thus the British women killed thousands, and thus they freed this kingdom of Wanis and of Melga. (117)

These acts of violence in war should unite the women with the men in terms of their British nationality, but instead their brutality fractures the unity even more. Why is this the case? Several possible reasons exist. Perhaps because these attacks are directed toward men instead of women, the men feel a sense of fear toward these female warriors. It is acceptable for men to fight men, but the idea of women fighting men seems to stir up different and conflicting emotions for Layamon. Perhaps, according to Bloch's ideas, these actions on the part of the women makes their connection to death too strong and too close. In the unspoken code of the Arthurian world, men create death and women mourn because of it. If the tables are turned and women bring about death, men may have to be the ones who grieve, placing them in a role with which they are not familiar.

The main contradiction between the treatment of male and female warriors is this idea of the fractures created by war. Men create fractures through their battles, even through the victorious ones, for something is lost in every war. Knights and warriors die, land is destroyed, and the sense of loss is felt on both the national and the individual level. As Donoghue points out, "The island [of Britain] becomes not only a field on which different races strive for dominance, but it is also the prize" (561). With every battle, though, that prize is diminished slightly. The land is fractured, along with its people. The questions are why fractures are repeatedly associated with women, and why

women's attempts to create successful fractures are looked upon in a different (and critical) light.

These questions may be addressed by looking at Homi Bhabha's essay "Of Mimicry and Man." Bhabha's description of the way mimicry works in relationships between colonizers and their colonized relates to the British women in Layamon's *Brut*, because they do have some connection to colonized peoples. " ... [T]hen colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (Bhabha 126). British women in the position of warriors can be viewed as a kind of mimicry of their male counterparts: "almost the same, but not quite." Women's attempts at mimicry in the *Brut* are seen as always flawed, always different. The difference comes in the excessive violence of the women mentioned at the beginning of the *Brut*, or in the way Rowenna employs treachery through family trust. These methods do not fit into the chivalric code of battle, and therefore they can never be quite right. Rowenna's actions can also be understood to a certain extent by the Britons because she is a foreigner, but the brutality of the British women warriors are not so easily dismissable.

Bhabha also writes, "Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both 'normalized knowledges' and disciplinary powers" (126). Layamon does use a kind of discipline of

the women warriors, as they are never mentioned again. Their sole appearance is at the beginning of the *Brut*, and they are talked about as a thing of the past. The phrase "a man should have seen ..." evokes a sense of actions further in the past than does the use of the past tense throughout the rest of the narrative. This reference to the scene as something notable to be observed contributes to the idea that the actions of the women are an aberration, something out of the ordinary. Something is not quite right about the barbaric actions of these women, but a sense of curiosity about them still exists. Since their attempts to engage in the definition of national identity is always in the realm of the inappropriate, the actions of these women don't count as telling British tales. They challenge the pedagogy, so their contributions are almost ignored, and certainly not valued.

The fact that such women warriors are only mentioned once in the entire *Brut* raises the question of whether these women were an isolated group or whether other battles were fought by women as well. If other such battles existed, did Layamon exclude them because of his own apparent ambivalence about them? Layamon appears to have conflicting emotions about the actions of these women. On one hand he seems to repudiate their violence, marking it as a bad example of battle. The women "laugh out loud" as they tear their victims to pieces, and they are machinelike in their determination to catch every man trying to escape. On the other hand, he delights in the very excessiveness of that violence. Again, the use of the phrase "a man should have seen ..." reflects almost a wishfulness on Layamon's part to have seen this event himself. The description of the way these women tear their opponents apart resonates with the

description of how Hengest and the Saxons literally stab Vortiger's men in the back. Both contain inappropriate displays of violence that do not reside within the confines of the chivalric code. This connection could be a way of feminizing the Other, in this case the Saxons as enemy. To say that the Saxons are as incorrect in their battle conduct as women, even British women, is a relatively severe insult. It also glorifies the Britons' defeat by the Saxons in this battle, in a sense removing some of the shame of such a loss, for it places the blame on the bad manners of the Saxons rather than on the gullibility of the British.

This description of the British women in battle also could represent a certain longing on Layamon's part. The women do not just kill their opponents; they tear their opponents apart in a violent way. These women are the only ones who get to behave in such a ritualistic yet uncontrolled manner. As women they are not subject to the discipline that the male soldiers must endure. The only British man who even comes close to this kind of brutality is Arthur in his dream. It is significant that the object of his subconscious violence is Guenevere:

> There I saw Wenhaver eke, dearest of women to me; all the mickel hall roof with her hand she drew down; the hall gan to tumble, and I tumbled to the ground, so that my right arm brake in pieces ... and I grasped my dear sword with my left hand, and smote off Mordred his head, so that it rolled on the field. And the queen I cut all in pieces with my dear sword, and afterwards I set her down in a black pit. (258-259)

In Arthur's dream, Mordred is merely decapitated, but Guenevere receives the brunt of his violent rage. This dream upsets Arthur greatly, and his brutality does not offer the kind of release that Layamon's depiction of the women suggests is possible.

Layamon's description of Arthur's dream is also significant, according to Maureen Fries, because "it presents us—for the first time in medieval Arthurian literature to my knowledge—with a Guenevere who is an agent rather than an instrument of action. ... True to medieval gender roles, she does not (may not) bear arms, but her hands alone are capable of pulling down the hall's whole roof" (24). Fries says the dream shows what happens when people break out of the roles assigned to their genders. In Arthur's dream, Guenevere has taken over for Mordred the role of Arthur's greater enemy. Both die, but the work of Guenevere's, not Mordred's, hands lives on—the roof of the great hall is still destroyed. She has told her own tale, but unlike the British women on the battlefield, her act of courage does not exist in the waking world.

These women do represent Bloch's idea of women as being connected to rituals of death, but in this battle their actions are directed toward prolonging the pain of death instead of easing it. The men never get to behave in such a ritualistic manner toward their enemies (at least during their waking hours), and perhaps Layamon is hinting at some dissatisfaction with the chivalric code that prevents knights from acting in such a way.

Many of the women in the *Brut* embody the male idea of incorrect attitudes toward death. The female warriors here take death too far and express themselves too violently, while women like Guenevere and Ygærne grieve incorrectly. Ygærne does not grieve at all for her dead husband Gorlois; she merely marvels at the fact that is was really Uther who came to her bed. At the end of the *Brut*, Guenevere grieves for the wrong man. After she is warned by a traitorous knight of Arthur's, she tells Mordred of the approaching army and worries for his life. "The queen lay in York; never was she so

sorrowful; that was Wenhaver the queen, most miserable of women! She heard say sooth words, how often Mordred fled, and how Arthur him pursued; woe was to her the while, that she was alive!" (263). Layamon also never shows a woman dying: they all just seem to fade away. Death, sometimes violent and sometimes noble, seems reserved for the men in the narrative. These women vary greatly in their reaction to death, yet they all bring about a similar kind of sorrow, an idea that women are interfering in the male realm of creating death. According to Julia Kristeva, in fact, women (in the person of the mother) may be the focus of death for both men and women. In her book *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, Kristeva writes:

> I make of Her an image of Death so as not to be shattered through the hatred I bear against myself when I identify with Her, for that aversion is in principle meant for her as it is an individuating dam against confusional love. Thus the feminine as image of death is not only a screen for my fear of castration, but also an imaginary safety catch for the matricidal drive that, without such a representation, would pulverize me into melancholia if it did not drive me to crime. No, it is She who is death-bearing, therefore I do not kill myself in order to kill her but I attack her, harass her, represent her ... (28)

Layamon does associate women with death often in the *Brut*, but just as Kristeva describes, these women also associate themselves with death quite often. The female warriors do not shy away from the process of death, but instead they rejoice and revel in it. Rowenna seems to enjoy killing Vortimer, and Guenevere apparently does not feel any remorse for the thousands of men who will die because of her affair with Mordred. She does seem to feel the most guilt of any woman in the narrative, but it apparently focuses on her personal transgression of adultery and not the larger issue of national unity. This positioning of Guenevere on the side of the individual drama rather than the larger issue

of the nation goes along with the idea of women as non-contributors to the furthering of national unity.

According to Kristeva's logic, these women become death-bearing in order to help facilitate both their own and the men's sense of loss. Although the actions of these women do not contribute to the formation of the British national identity, this idea of the lost mother still relates. It is possible that nationalism tries to take the place of the mother. Or more specifically, it is possible that narratives like Layamon's *Brut* try to shape nationalism into a form of consolation for the loss of the mother. In this way it seems to make sense that women are excluded from the production of the nation. Since they are associated with death and with loss, how can they possibly help to create union? Bhabha's ideas on unity in "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation" would suggest that unity, whether it is positive or negative, is an impossible goal. This fear that unity can never really be achieved seems to be figured in the women in the *Brut*, for they are seen as either not contributing to or actually destroying men's attempts at a united national identity.

The idea of storytelling is embodied most prominently in the person of Merlin, who through his prophecies creates the history that is to come for the British people. His final prophecy does not mention a woman, only the events that will occur after that woman has performed her given duty. Arthur receives serious wounds during the battle with Mordred, and he goes to a woman to be healed. "And I will fare to Avalun, to the fairest of all maidens, to Argante the queen, an elf most fair, and she shall make my wounds all sound; make me all whole with healing draughts. And afterwards I will come

again to my kingdom, and dwell with the Britons in mickle joy" (264). Two of Argante's women bear Arthur away, marking them as yet more women who cause separation and destroy unity. The opportunity exists here for a woman to finally be a source of union for Briton, but instead of the prophecy saying that Argante will bring Arthur back, Merlin merely says "that an Arthur should yet come to help the English" (264).

Donoghue points to this mention of Merlin's prophecy as Layamon's attempt to rise above his anti-Anglo-Saxon feelings:

> The closest Layamon comes to replacing racial antipathies with a unifying nationalism is in a crucial passage near the end. ... Arthur says he will return to help the *British*, which is consistent with Layamon's racial vision of history, yet a few lines later Layamon restates the prophecy through Merlin, ... that Arthur will come to help the *English*. ... It may be an attempt by Layamon to extend Arthur's promise to the English as well as the British in a kind of paninsular gesture of unity against outsiders. (563)

While Layamon does not seem inclined to include women in his view of a unified Britain, his interchangeable use of the terms "British" and "English" could be an attempt to use his writing to imagine a cohesive nation. In this way, Layamon uses the narrative about Merlin's prophecy in two ways: to continue to distance women from the idea of national unity and to create that unity through a history that is always in the future.

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Vita

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